

“Armed Thinker,” “Militant Stoic”: John Morley through French Eyes

Kevin A. Morrison

In 1870 the literary critic and Anglophile Augustin Filon arrived on England’s shores. A graduate of the École normale supérieure, Filon had a brief but distinguished career as a lecturer at lycées in Nice and Grenoble, before being selected in 1867 as tutor to Napoléon-Eugène-Louis Bonaparte, the Prince Imperial.¹ In 1870, during the regency of Empress Eugénie at the beginning of the Franco-Prussian War, Filon also served as her private secretary. With the overthrow of the Second Empire on 4 September 1870, following Napoleon III’s defeat in battle and his capture by the Germans, Empress Eugénie and the prince fled separately to England, as did Filon. The imperial family made their residence at Camden Place, Chislehurst, where Filon resumed his duties as tutor. In May 1871, at the end of the war, Napoleon III, released by the Germans, joined his family.

Filon was with the Prince Imperial during his year at King’s College, London, between 1871 and 1872, and at his side when the boy was called back to Chislehurst in January 1873 to be with his dying father. When the prince – now the pretender to the throne – took up his studies again at the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich, from which he would graduate in 1875, he and Filon lived in a rented house near the school. On the completion of the prince’s studies, Filon returned to France, where he married and had a son. In 1878, a year before the Prince Imperial was killed in combat as part of a British expedition in Zululand, Filon and his family relocated to England. They made their home first in the seaside town of Margate and later on the outskirts of London in Croydon.

An avid theatregoer, Filon is largely remembered today by literary critics in the English-speaking world for his reflections on Victorian drama.² But in the late 1880s and early 1890s, when home rule for Ireland was the leading political issue, he was also a keen observer of British politics. The defeat of William Ewart Gladstone's first Home Rule Bill for Ireland in 1886 had triggered the dissolution of Parliament. The general election that followed saw the center of power shift from Liberals to Conservatives. In its aftermath Filon published a series of essays in the prestigious *Revue des deux mondes* on the men who, he thought, would most likely dominate English politics in the years to come: the Conservative Lord Randolph Churchill; the Liberal unionist Joseph Chamberlain; and the Liberal John Morley, the chief secretary for Ireland in 1886, who was one of the chief instigators of the Home Rule Bill. Filon subsequently published these sketches, written in French, in book form as *Profils anglais*, adding a study of Charles Stewart Parnell, the Irish nationalist.³ Although he had died in 1891, Parnell was a hugely consequential politician whose impassioned defense of Irish home rule, Filon believed, had been a major influence on the other three men.

Although late nineteenth and early twentieth century biographers would frequently refer to Filon, he is almost entirely absent in modern studies of the personages who captured his attention. Churchill and Chamberlain have been the subject of numerous studies in the past few decades. Yet none draw on Filon.⁴ One possible reason for this neglect is that neither *Profils anglais* nor the individual profiles of Churchill, Chamberlain, Parnell, or Morley have ever been translated into English.

By comparison to Churchill and Chamberlain, Morley has suffered from neglect as well. With the exception of a few monographs in the mid-twentieth century, and an admirable critical edition of his most significant prose work, *On Compromise*, surprisingly little has been published.⁵ Yet his centrality to Victorian society and culture all but ensured renewed attention. Several recent and forthcoming studies of Morley suggest a current resurgence of interest.⁶ In part, this has been facilitated by the lifting of the embargo on his papers, which have

recently been catalogued and made available by the staff of the Bodleian Library at Oxford.

Active in politics, Morley was also a journalist of considerable importance and one of the period's foremost biographers. In Filon's summation, Morley is "the first English leader to have come out of our ranks – us, people of letters – who, in power represents the Idea, just as Randolph Churchill represents modernised Tradition and Joseph Chamberlain the popular interests." Before entering Parliament for the first time in an 1883 by-election as Liberal member for Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Morley served as editor of the *Fortnightly Review* and the *Pall Mall Gazette*. He also wrote biographies of Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot and the Encyclopaedists, Edmund Burke, and Richard Cobden, and he served as general editor between 1878 and 1892, and again from 1902 to 1919, of Macmillan's *English Men of Letters* series.⁷ Even after he entered politics, Morley continued to write, including a volume on Walpole and a biography of Cromwell, and he published a collection of miscellaneous essays that had first appeared in periodicals.⁸ In the first two years of his political career, Morley edited *Macmillan's Magazine*, which provided a much-needed source of income when members of Parliament were not remunerated. His multivolume *Life of William Ewart Gladstone* remains a key resource for the study of the Grand Old Man.⁹

In the pages that follow, I provide an abbreviated and annotated translation of Filon's profile of Morley, first published in the November 1891 edition of *Revue des deux mondes*. The original essay is close to 20,000 words, which renders full publication impractical. Rather than making arbitrary cuts throughout, I have concentrated on reducing the essay's length by excising a section on Morley's studies of the French philosophes and trimming the discussion of Irish Home Rule. Filon's analysis of Morley's writings on figures of the French enlightenment, it seems to me, has been surpassed by Edward Alexander's excellent overview of these works.¹⁰ The section on Irish Home Rule is somewhat bogged down by references to contemporary events and figures that would require extensive annotation. While

pruning this section, I have sought to remain faithful to the spirit in which Filon wrote it.

Filon's account begins by contrasting Morley with Churchill and Chamberlain. "Over the past twenty years," Filon notes, "England has given us a probably unique picture of a society transitioning from aristocracy to democracy with no crisis, no suffering, almost unconsciously, through a slow and peaceful evolution of its institutions and customs." He continues: "To separate the old France from the new France in which we live, revolutionary forceps were required; aristocratic England gave birth to democratic England during a chloroform-induced sleep." Whereas Churchill was a Conservative who owed his parliamentary position in part to the prominence of his family, Chamberlain was a Liberal and a self-made man in whom electors recognized themselves. Both staunch defenders of Irish Home Rule, Churchill and Chamberlain, Filon notes, "met in a common cause, which was to make land ownership and political power available to the masses, and another cause, consisting in defending national unity against any attempt at devolution."

Following this brief introduction, Filon turns to Morley, with whom – of the four political figures who captured his imagination – he feels, as a fellow essayist, a particular kinship. The character sketch provides insight into Morley's development as a political thinker, including his associations with leading Positivists and the formative influence of John Stuart Mill and William Ewart Gladstone; his career as a journalist and a writer of historical studies whose approach sharply differed from Thomas Carlyle's and Thomas Babington Macaulay's; and the reception of his most famous text, *On Compromise* (1874), which the historian Basil Willey characterized as "one of the central documents of the Victorian age, ranking with such works as Mill's *Liberty* [...] and Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*" (276).¹¹ It also sheds light on the leading role Morley played in debates on home rule for Ireland by linking his studies of the issue as a journalist to the political positions he would come to espouse. After reading portions of Filon's essay, Margot Asquith noted to herself: "The